

GIGS

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The city's first comedy festival is a showcase for the homegrown talent being nurtured by funnyman Jami Gong, writes **Alan Warboys**

Stand and deliver

Flaughter is infectious, Jami Gong must be a super-spreader. Little more than six months after opening Hong Kong's first full-time comedy club, the TakeOut Comedy Shop, the Chinese-American funnyman is taking another gamble: the city's first dedicated comedy festival.

What's more remarkable is that, aside from headline act Paul Ogata from Hawaii, the performers are all local amateurs trained by Gong over the past year. And he's expecting a packed house most nights.

"They're not all gonna be the next Jerry Seinfeld, but they all have talent," says the shaven-headed, bespectacled Gong, who runs training classes for his wannabe comics. "We're getting good crowds, too. We opened in March and in July we were sold out every night."

The club began with English shows only but started Chinese nights in June that are gradually picking up a following, he says.

The week-long festival, which runs from tomorrow until October 27, is being held at Gong's cosy club in a SoHo basement after an opening party tonight at Lux in Lan Kwai Fong, one of the events many

sponsors. Subsequent nights include a Funniest Person in Hong Kong Contest, held in English and Cantonese, the debut of the People's Liberation Improv Troupe, open mic nights and a free stand-up comedy class. "Anyone could win the competition," says Gong. "We have lots of really funny entrants and it's up to our guest judges."

Comics will be judged on originality, audience reaction and stage presence. "Comedy is 50 per cent talent and 50 per cent hard work," he says.

Gong, born and raised in New York's Chinatown, is an inspiration for his charges. He got into the gag game in his second year at university after friends dared him to compete in a stand-up comedy contest. He was hooked instantly and went on to start his own comedy venture in Chinatown, a project aimed as much at revitalising the area as making people laugh. In recognition of his social activism he was given the honour of carrying the Olympic torch for 400 metres through New York in 2004. As a

comic, he featured on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* before moving to Hong Kong last year to start The Takeout Comedy Club.

Hong Kong's homegrown comics are in short supply, says Gong, but that may soon change. Dozens have signed up for his course. He's hoping to unearth a talent who can match, or even surpass, the feats of veteran stars Michael Hui Koon-man, Dayo Wong Chi-wah, Stephen Chow Sing-chi and Jan Lamb Ho-fung. "There are no famous Chinese comedienmes, but we have some women learning. I'd love to find the first female Chinese star," says Gong.

"There has never really been any stand-up comedy in Hong Kong," says Chris Chan, one of Gong's protégés. Chan, 27, is perhaps Gong's star pupil. Hong Kong born and bred, he's eloquently funny in English and Cantonese, and is taking part in the festival's Chinese competition. "I always wanted to do stand-up," says Chan, who learned about the club through a Chinese-language newspaper. "There was nowhere to perform before his place."

After performing his own material at an open-mic session, Chan's jokes about showbiz personalities, juvenile crime and relationships struck a chord with the club's audience. Gong is pumped about his potential, as he is about all his comic turns.

Chris Coleman, a professor of music composition theory at Baptist University, took up joke-telling for fun. "The subject I teach is rather dry. Students' minds can wander if you don't say something to bring their attention back," he says.

Coleman, who muses on life and local issues in his act, passed on his new passion to his two children, Sean, 23, and Sarah, 16. "Dad said it was so much fun and we should try it," says Sarah, a student at Sha Tin College, who's a fan of Robin Williams. She jokes about life as a teenager. "It's so much fun, especially on days when you do stuff and make everybody laugh," she says. "It doesn't feel as good when you do stuff and nobody laughs." "There's no such thing as a funny

joke. It's all in how the audience respond to it," says Sean, who's looking for work on radio or as a voice-over artist.

Crowds at the club, which runs six nights a week, vary from a full house of 90 to a low of two. "That couple had a private show. How cool is that?" says his father. The Colemans are all competing at the festival and are keen to learn from Ogata, who was once crowned the funniest Asian-American in the US.

Ogata, who will headline three shows, recently won the 32nd Annual San Francisco International Comedy Competition that was previously won by comics such as Dana Carvey of *Saturday Night Live* fame. He's the first-ever Asian-American winner of the competition and has appeared on CBS television's *The Late Late Show* as well as in a couple of movies.

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Jami Gong, TakeOut Comedy Shop

He headlined Takeout Comedy Club's opening night and proved a big hit with local audiences. Gong is hoping to even up the balance of trade by taking Chan to the US. "He's a real talent and could go down well there," says Gong.

Chan's ability has already secured paid gigs locally, including emceeing an awards ceremony. But he isn't giving up his day job as an advertising copywriter just yet. "I'll see how it goes," he says.

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Hong Kong Comedy Festival, the Takeout Comedy Shop, B/F 34 Elgin St, Central, various prices. For details, go to: hkcomedyfestival.com. To register for the competition, e-mail jami@takeoutcomedy.com or tel: 6220 4436

Jokers high:
Jami Gong
(far right) and
Paul Ogata

